DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 395 996 TM 025 195

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TITLE Convergent Inquiries: Gloria Anzaldua's "Mestiza" Consciousness and Critical Ethnography.
PUB DATE Apr 96
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Ethnicity; *Ethnography; *Evaluation Methods; Minority Groups; *Participant Observation; *Qualitative Research; *Research Methodology
IDENTIFIERS *Anzaldua (Gloria); Consciousness; *Mestizos (People); Mixed Race Persons; Positivism

ABSTRACT

Parallels in the thinking of Gloria Anzaldua as expressed in her work "Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza" (1987) about "mestiza" consciousness and the tasks of critical ethnography are explored. Ethnography, as it shifts toward the new paradigm of critical ethnography, can learn much from the consciousness Anzaldua projects for the mixed race, minority female, the "mestiza," in that this consciousness tolerates ambiguity while it engages dynamically with subjectivity. Ethnography is a qualitative methodology arising from the growing movement away from positivism. Critical ethnography, particularly, entails the immersion of a participant/observer, the researcher, into the culture of a particular group or setting. The tools are varied, the process critical, but at the heart of critical ethnography is a political challenge to the hierarchies inherent in positivism. Anzaldua has also rejected positivism in her call for uprooting dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness. The ethnographer has the task of assisting in the work of uncovering and discovering agency and subjectivity, tasks that the mestiza faces in examining her past and reinterpreting her history. What separates ethnography from critical ethnography is the latter's concern with agency and subjectivity as it relates to social transformation. This is the "borderlands" of critical ethnography. Consciousness does not come easily for the mestiza, nor for the ethnographer, but both are engaged in "border crossing." (SLD)

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Convergent Inquiries: Gloria Anzaldúa's *Mestiza* Consciousness and Critical Ethnography

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Institutional Violence & Schooling:
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> Don't let us forget that the causes of human actions are usually immeasurably more complex and varied than our subsequent explanations of them.
>
> ---Fydor Dostoevsky, *The Idiot*

> *En unas pocas centurias*, the future will belong to the mestiza. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos--that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave--*la mestiza* creates a new consciousness.
>
> ---Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera*

The paradigms are shifting. There is a fault line in epistemology, a slowly widening fissure that reflects the elastic strain of ambiguity against certainty. Questions are becoming more important than answers and inquiry has found higher ground than abstraction. Anzaldúa has peered into the epistemological chasm and seen the future, a *mestiza* consciousness. Ethnography, as it shifts towards the new paradigm of critical ethnography,

has much to learn from this consciousness that tolerates ambiguity while dynamically engaging with subjectivity.

Ethnography is a qualitative methodology arising out of the growing movement away from positivism, a movement that has been called "a crisis of representation" (Marcus and Fischer, 1986) and has risen out of the brash challenging of the 60s. The dictionary (Random House unabridged, 1989) defines ethnography as "a branch of anthropology dealing with the scientific description of individual cultures." Borrowed from anthropology, yes; dealing with description of individual cultures, yes and much more; scientific--not really, although the debates on reliability and validity continue for some.

Ethnography, particularly critical ethnography, entails the total immersion of a participant/observer (researcher) into the culture of a particular group or setting, e.g., the educational culture of 13 year old females, or the workplace culture of graveyard shift nurses. The task of the ethnographer is to gather copious data; thick description of the actions, interactions, speech and other expressions of the participants (subjects). The tools of ethnography are varied; intensive interviewing, observation, videotaping, group discussion, surveys, and others. Process is a critical component, for the ethnographer must

constantly be rethinking the data in order to find the critical patterns that will constitute the findings.

At the heart of critical ethnography is a political challenge to the hierarchies inherent in positivism--hierarchies that are created by dichotomized thinking. The epistemology of science is an epistemology of dualisms: nature/culture, subject/object, knower/known. Dualisms are the foundation of hierarchies and hierarchies are a complex system of domination and control. The use of qualitative methodologies implies a minimal understanding of this. Quantitative research has never been able to examine agency or subjectivity within those who are studied. Decades of social science research have produced interpretations of those studied, yet have not been able to provide representations of those studied.

Anzaldúa has wrestled with the two-headed snake of positivism:

> The work of *mestiza* consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war (p. 80).

The work of the critical ethnographer is to break down the subject-object duality within culture and inquiry. The traditional dualism of subject-object, as determined by masculinist and positivist logic, calls for the distancing of the all-knowing subject from the object being studied. What separates ethnography from critical ethnography is the latter's concern with agency and subjectivity as it relates to social transformation. I can tell your story or I can participate in the telling of your story. This is the borderlands of critical ethnography.

Consider the borders of the 13 year old girl. If I am to understand meaning, as constructed by her, I must recognize the multiple borders that she contends with and share the mapping of them with her. Gender, adolescence, grade level, class, race, ethnicity, religion, language domains--these are basic borders that she visits each day. There may be many more--abuse, divorce, disability, or self-image. She probably faces the most rigid border of all--ignorance of the fact that her life is mapped with borders.

> Because I, a *mestiza,* continually walk out of one culture and into another, because I am in all cultures at the same time, *alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro, me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio. Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan simultáneamente* (p. 77).

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Because I am bordered by limited language domains, I must struggle to make meaning of the Spanish, an old dictionary in my lap; "soul in two worlds, three, four, my head buzzes with contradictions. I am disoriented by all of the voices speaking simultaneously." I cross over the language border, awkwardly, momentarily and then quickly slip back to English and the false security of a dominant language.

Critical ethnography is *mestiza* consciousness and is also an agent for *mestiza* consciousness. To borrow from Anzaldúa: "The ambivalence from the clash of voices" captures the constant confusion of ethnography--in observing the actors/agents within a particular culture I am bombarded with multivoicedness--who is talking and what does it mean? The common cry of the ethnographer is "I don't know what I'm looking at, I don't understand what I hear." Although Anzaldúa speaks most directly to the mestiza confronted with the specific dilemmas of mixed bloods, spiritual ways, and languages within a dominant culture, we are all *mestizas* when it comes to reconciling representation with meaning. To search for meaning, that is, how do people construct meaning within cultures, is to guarantee what Anzaldúa calls *un choque*, a cultural collision.

Given the difficulty of inquiry across borders of constructed reality and self-determined meaning, the risk of *un choque*, one can almost understand why man (masculine generic not emplied)erected positivism and took refuge in its epistemological bulwark. Man's intolerance for ambiguity is the cornerstone of science. Granted, it is because of that intolerance that the seas and stars are charted, and the grand edifices were built, and the resources were inventoried--even time has been harnessed for measure. We are beginning to realize, however, that this intolerance for ambiguity has been destructive and depletive. In the scientific rush for explanation, substance is trampled, resources are destroyed, living things are jeopardized. In a long tradition of quantitative inquiry in the social sciences, agency and subjectivity have been ignored, lost, and often destroyed.

As an ethnographer, I have the opportunity of assisting in the work of uncovering/discovering agency and subjectivity. I can be midwife to this process, and, if willing to do the work of reflexivity, I can participate in my own birthing/rebirthing of agency/subjectivity. It is not enough for individuals to experience agency/subjectivity once. As our lives are constantly being remapped by new borders of experience and reality, we must continually undergo this process of uncovering

agency/subjectivity. No culture is static. No individual remains in one culture, unless isolated from others. As the borders change, the confusion and uncertainty continue. Anzaldúa describes this well:

> The work takes place underground-subconsciously. It is work that the soul performs. That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the *mestiza* stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs (p. 79).

This locus of "colliding phenomena" can be helpful to the ethnographer. I must develop the eagle and serpent eyes, to borrow again from Anzaldúa; this is what ethnographers call the macro and micro view of culture. I cannot focus my vision on the critical phenomena operating within a culture unless I have surveyed the larger view; there is no meaning without context and there is no context without meaning. In the observation of "colliding phenomena" I can facilitate in the process of "uniting all that is separate" by collaborating with my participants in the construction of representation of their experiences. I can also be facilitated by this process by coming to understand how my vision constructs meaning in what I observe. This is the process of birthing agency/subjectivity as well as the point of

opportunity for the ethnographer to transform the differential power relations that are inherent in a relationship that is founded in the traditional dualism of subject/object, observer/observed.

Critical ethnography, from neo-marxist and feminist theory perspectives, has a very important agenda. It is not enough to observe and document the phenomena within cultural systems. Critical ethnographers are interested in studying the dialectical relationship between social systems and human actors, with particular concern for aiding actors in their resistance to systems of dominance and repression (Anderson, 1989.) We can learn a great deal about methods for facilitating this agenda from Anzaldúa, as she writes about the path of the *mestiza*:

> Her first step is to take inventory. *Despojando, desgranando, quitando paja*. Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back--which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo? (p.82)

The participant must also do this, by telling their story again and again, stripping it to the bone, and the ethnographer must ask the questions that reach to the sources of meaning--how have you come to this place of knowing about your story? Anzaldúa continues:

> *Pero es difícil* differentiating between *lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto*. She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of. *Luego bota lo que no vale, los desmientos, los desencuentos, el embrutecimiento. Aguarda el juicio, hondo y enraízado, de la gente antigua*. This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar (82).

Yes, it is so difficult to distinguish what is inherited, what is acquired, what is imposed. At the locus of resistance, each actor/agent can deconstruct for reconstruction their particular location within a culture. If one understands the imposition of dominance and repression and can situate oneself clearly within it, this is fertile ground for transformation to be seeded.

Quantitative measures tell us how much of something we are. Children are persecuted with standard test scores with absolutely no information to assist them in understanding why they perform the way they do. Children are not told that their cognitive schemes are extremely complex systems that cannot be fully explained by anyone but themselves. There is no psychometric measure, no cognitive science that can explain the discontinuity

of children who are required to perform with instruments of measure that have no meaning, except to reify positions of relative intelligence--"my scores are low I must be stupid." To facilitate agency in this situation requires that the child be allowed to explore and explain their story of knowledge; how it is inherited, acquired and imposed.

Children are *mestizas*, hybridized by child status and adult expectations. Every child who has struggled with reconciling these different cultures has been wounded. Many have been branded as ignorant and will carry that shameful burden into adulthood. Increasing numbers are aggregated into the generic "at risk." The legacy of positivism will not tolerate the ambiguity of childhood. The rush for methods that will produce the greatest good for society has left many children psychically trampled. We are just beginning to look at the borders of race, class, gender, and ethnicity--how they assist and hinder the development of a child.

Anzaldúa writes about *la facultad* as being "the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities." She proposes that those who become Others within systems of dominance usually learn this skill. My ethnographic experiences with adolescent girls is that many of them have developed acute social

sentience--an ability to assess situations for their relational pitfalls. As Anzaldúa notes, this skill, however helpful, is a strong indication that some system of oppression is at work and is exacting a price:

> We lose something in this mode of initiation, something is taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance (p.39).

Consciousness does not come easy for the *mestiza*. Subjectivity and active agency does not come easy for any Other in a cultural system. Ethnography is not a natural process. It is a cultural intervention, an interruption in cultural routine. The ethnographer can, as many critics point out (Stacey, 1988; Strathern, 1987), add to the participants' discontinuity; the relationship between participants and the participant/observer is not an equal one--betrayal, abandonment and misrepresentation are inherent risks in such a relationship. Moreover, the participant may be overwhelmed by her newly discovered agency--the responsibility of subjectivity can be intimidating, as Anzaldúa explains:

> Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesia*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape "knowing," I won't be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. "Knowing" is painful

> because after "it" happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before (p. 48).

The risks associated with the ethnographic process do not justify abandonment of the quest for representation. Undeniably, stasis is safer than critical awareness. Ignorance may be bliss, but awareness is empowering. It is presumptuous to assume that the participant/observer, the one who initiates the quest, is not at risk. The process will change everyone involved, perhaps in different degrees, perhaps not. Borders will be crossed.

> We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward. *Nuestra alma el trabajo*, the opus, the great alchemical work; spiritual *mestizaje*, a "morphogenesis," and inevitable unfolding. We have become the quickening serpent movement (p. 81).

The work of ethnographers is border crossing. With eagle and serpent eyes we cross the borders. We ask the questions for the sake of the storytellers. We do not take away the story, we take away a representation of the story and its teller. And we leave some of the questions with the storytellers. Questions they may cast off, questions they may knead and braid into answers, or maybe...into new questions.

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